

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: October 30, 2011
Sermon Title: Lessons from *My Habitat for Humanity*
Scripture: Matthew 18:15-22
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 18:15-22

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Jesus got a raw deal. He never hurt a fly. He mostly talked about personal responsibility. He helped the down and out and pretty much left the high and mighty to themselves. Yet his friends betrayed him, society ignored him, the government killed him. Or, as the Prophet Isaiah put it, "He was despised and rejected ... pierced and crushed" (Isaiah 53:3-5)

I bet in your life you've gotten a raw deal from time to time. A raw deal at work. A raw deal from some supposed "friend." A raw deal in marriage. A raw deal in business. A raw deal in some endeavor that you thought was important – it might have been in school or on a team or in the game of life.

I got a raw deal. You've heard about it in my October 16 sermon, you've read about it in my e-mails. It's even summarized in the Sunday bulletin. I got a raw

deal. I gave my life, my career, my sweat ... I gave everything I had to help make Habitat for Humanity great, to help Habitat's founder realize his vision, to help the poor all over the world to have a little better life.

Yet, in short order, I was fired for defending women against the founder's harassment. I was blackballed, smeared. Friends and colleagues of long standing betrayed me, quite literally turned their backs on me, quite literally ran away from me. It took two years to find a job and a lot longer than that to find peace.

Now, let me make two statements very clear. First, I am not comparing myself to Jesus. We all get raw deals one way or another, and the only useful point is not that we are like Jesus, it's that Jesus is like us! Jesus's very humanity is meant to tell us that he knows us; he knows our life, our world, our joys, and our raw deals. We are not alone. Ever. In anything, Jesus is "Emmanuel," God with us, even in the dumps.

Second, I'm drawing out my raw deal in almost boringly, melodramatically painful detail for one reason and one reason only. So that when I tell you the number-one lesson from my book, you will know, you will believe that I know what I am talking about. I'm not just being high-minded or idealistic. I'm talking from miserable, rotten experience.

The number-one lesson – and it's repeated throughout the book – the number-one lesson is this: don't waste 20 years getting over anything in life. I don't care what it is, I don't care how bad it was, I don't care how big your raw deal was. I don't care how big the knives that were stuck in your back were. Don't waste 20 years of your life getting over anything. Whatever injustice, whatever brokenness, whatever unfairness, whatever loss, whatever wrong, whatever hurt, is not worth, is never worth wasting 20 years in bitterness. I know.

Remember the movie "Groundhog Day," where Bill Murray wakes up each morning and it's exactly the same day as the day before? And it becomes mind-numbingly annoying! Living your life with bitterness, with regret, with anger is the same thing. You get up each day in the same emotional place as the day you first got hurt or wronged. One month later, one year later. Five years later, 13 years later. And you're still beaten up, still raw, still flustered. The whole world has moved on, including whoever wronged you, and you're still stuck in no-man's land. That describes me. You were kind enough not to mention it, but you knew. One friend said to Alida, "I hope when the book comes out, it's finally over for David."

"O.K., wise guy," you may be thinking, "how do I get over it, move on, find closure, and all those other clichés that seem so insensitive?" I'd start with faith. It's that simple. I didn't say it was easy, I said it was simple. Jesus preached forgiveness. He lived it, he breathed it, he taught it, he practiced it. He started

easy: "Love God," "love your neighbor." Then he built on it. He expanded neighbor to stranger. Then he included enemies. "Love your enemies." "Forgive 70 times seven." Then he went out and did it.

Get the image in your mind. Jesus was falsely arrested, falsely convicted, falsely crucified. Trumped-up charges, paid informers, political shenanigans. He's even declared innocent ... and then nailed to the cross. On the cross, bloodied, beaten, and dying; from the cross, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them." For Jesus, loving your enemies was not philosophical, not theological, not doctrinal. For Jesus, loving your enemies was personal.

You know why we don't rush to "love our enemies"? You know why we don't want to "forgive 70 times seven"? Because we don't want to let someone off the hook, we don't want the bad folks in our lives to get away scot-free. So we live on our emotion. I sure did. I loved being the martyr. I loved being the victim of injustice. I'd start interviews with, "Hi, I'm David Rowe, perhaps you've heard of me. I got fired for being a defender of women." Then I'd go on and on with a 45-minute riff, while everyone's eyes glazed over. I wasn't letting Habitat off the hook. I wasn't letting Habitat's founder, Millard Fuller, go scot-free. I wore my raw deal like a "red badge of courage."

But here's a radical thought. I think Jesus pushed all this forgiveness business for our own benefit, for my own benefit. Not the other guy's. Not the perpetrator's. Not the jerk's benefit. Ours. Mine. Yours.

Set us free. Even the Lord's Prayer accrues to our benefit. "Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, as we forgive our debtors, those who trespass against us." Believe me, I got trespassed against. I got walked all over AND kicked while I was down. But Jesus doesn't say to let them off the hook. Jesus says get ME off the hook, set ME free.

It was indeed FAITH. My religion, my Christianity, my Good News, and to tell you the truth, my church – you folks, with a living faith, that got me over it. I believe in the power of faith. I also believe in passion. It was believing passionately that got me to the top, as we built Habitat into something great. It was believing passionately that brought me down, as I defended women against harassment. It was believing passionately that got me back up.

When you're at a low point, ask yourself, "What is my passion? What do I live for? What do I care about?" It might be your family. It might be your pride, your good name, your reputation. It might be life itself, or your work, your calling.

When I got fired, some friends gave me two great bits of advice: Number One, get up at the same time in the morning, don't let depression lull you into sleep, don't

sleep away the day. Get up at the same time as when you had work because now your work is to find work. So get working! Number Two, a friend said when you're down and out, you're like a person drowning in the middle of the river. What is it on the shore, on the riverbank, on the other side, that will pull you to safety? What do you want so badly that the whirlwinds and whirlpools of life can't keep you down? Answer that, and you're on the way back. For me, it was to get back to church and mission, to become a pastor again, and to get FOCI moving again. I needed to get the lousy taste of lousy religion and lousy mission and lousy people out of my mouth. I needed to recapture the good taste of good religion and good mission and good people.

On one of my many, many job-hunting trips, I dropped by my old neighborhood in Queens. I parked in front of the little white stucco church I grew up in. I walked the streets and sidewalks, went by the "EI," the overhead subway in our neighborhood, then went over to PS 90 and to all the asphalt playgrounds and ballparks of my childhood, and back to my little church with the little pews and the little classrooms and the little membership.

And I said to myself, "I want this." I want a church where people try each day to live the faith. And I wanted a church that would welcome FOCI and let FOCI fulfill the vision God gave to me so long ago in India: to tell the story of God's love in Jesus Christ, to live the story of God's love in Jesus Christ. I wanted to know again, to feel again, that a few people with big hearts and real faith could produce Amazing Grace in the lives of thousands. All of that reached its zenith right here with you. Big hearts. Real faith. Amazing Grace.

All right, five minutes to go. Is there any take-away from this navel-gazing sermon of mine? Try this: don't give up on yourself. Don't give up on God. Don't give up on others. It's that simple. Don't give up on yourself. That's not easy to do after a while.

The first few weeks after you've been fired, laid off, raw-dealed, it's still easy to believe in yourself. You tell yourself it was unjust, unfair, bad luck. But after a while, after the rejections start coming in and piling up, you begin to doubt yourself. "Maybe it was my fault, maybe I am no good, maybe I have no value," you begin to think.

I applied for 105 jobs. That's not blanket résumés. I'm talking about 105 churches that needed a pastor that I wrote to in longhand, that I talked with, interviewed with.

One church was in Brooklyn, 25 people on a Sunday. They just wanted 10 hours a week, a little sermon, some hospital visits. I didn't get the job. Another church I came in second. They said they didn't think I was the kind of guy they could go

out for a beer with. They were right. I wasn't much fun in those days. I'd given up on myself. Trust me, if you don't think you're worth anything, no one's going to argue with you. The world will gladly let you sit in a corner like Little Jack Horner, and you can eat your curds and whey and sulk your day away.

Second, don't give up on God. If you wake up in the morning and you're not dead (wait! That's an oxymoron) ... let's put it another way. If you wake up in the morning and you're not sitting on a cloud, you haven't sprouted wings, and there is no harp in the chair next to you, then God still has a purpose for you. If God has chosen to put breath in your nostrils, ideas in your head, and a step in your walk, God still has a purpose for you. God didn't fire you to give you a wake-up call. God didn't give you cancer or a divorce to give you a wake-up call. God didn't give you any raw deal just to give you a wake-up call. Your wake-up call is that you woke up! That's proof enough that God has a purpose for you.

I dropped in on the protesters at "Occupy New Haven," a quiet, clean, orderly sort of "tent city." For all the hype and holler, this was a pretty serene affair. One cardboard sign said, "The Revolution was in 1777. This is a rebirth."

I met this bum. He was very courteous to me, very helpful. He almost seemed to imply that I was too old. So I thanked him for his kindness, and he said, "My Mama didn't raise me to be a bum, but since I am a bum, I'm going to be a good bum." Substitute "God" for "Mama," and the meaning is just as clear. God didn't raise you to be a bum, so whatever it is that has befallen you, whatever has tripped you up or put you down, whatever raw deal you've endured, that's not you. Don't let that define you. Let God bring the best out of you. God hasn't given up on you.

I have a funeral this afternoon. The lady was 91. One might suppose that her quality of life, her purpose, was long over. But her granddaughter said she had learned more from her grandmother in the last few weeks, even the last few days, than in all her 40 years of life.

Billy Graham and Pope John Paul both said that they didn't believe in euthanasia because they figured God still had much to teach them, they had much to learn, and much to do right up to the end. God had a purpose for them.

So when you look down and you're not standing on a cloud, and you look over your shoulder and don't see any wings, God has a purpose for you. Get to it! And that purpose almost always involves others. I don't care how raw a deal you got in life, in marriage, in work, in family, even in church. You can't give up on others. Not everyone is a jerk. Not everyone is a no-good, backstabbing, low-down, lying son of a gun. So open up. Look around. Try again. Try ... trusting. Try believing. Try reaching out. Try loving. Get back in the game.

Let me close with a story I only partially tell in my book. I was invited to Uganda after the fall of Idi Amin, their brutal dictator. It was still a heart-wrenching and dangerous place. We actually had a Habitat meeting before I went, and someone said, "Let's send David to Uganda. If he comes back alive, we can start a Habitat project there!" So off I went.

My visit was inspired by widows, lots of widows, whose husbands had been murdered, and they organized themselves to resurrect their nation, their villages, their own lives. I met with hundreds and hundreds of them. I heard stories that broke my heart and made my skin crawl. On one of my last days, I met with more of these widows, and I asked how on earth they had survived. How could they get up each morning and function, put one foot in front of the other, cook, shop, go to church, breathe, believe ... live?

The women were appalled at my question, really shocked! They actually said to me, "You are a pastor! You have your own Bible, don't you? Don't you read the Bible? Don't you know the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den? Don't you know about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace? We have been in the Lion's Den. We have been in the Fiery Furnace. And we are still here. God needs us." These widows got a raw deal in life in a thousand different ways, and yet they were full-speed ahead.

My whole Habitat career, my FOCI career, have been filled with people who refused to let the raw deals of life, the injustices, setbacks, disappointments, wrongs, and just plain evil destroy their spirit, weaken their faith, or rule their lives.

Come to think of it, it's been a great journey.